Pacific Island Democracy: Regional and International Dimensions

A report prepared for the Commonwealth Secretariat

by

Dr John Henderson

Introduction

This paper analyses how democracy in the Pacific island countries has been shaped by outside influences. It seeks to answer the following questions: How far has this relationship impinged on Pacific island democratic institutions, cultures and values? What have been the effects of the development or collapse or democratic government of regional and international relationships? What practical measures can be taken to enhance regional democracy?

In considering an answer to these questions this paper draws on the framework for assessing democracy developed by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) which is headquartered in Stockholm, Sweden. I am currently using the IDEA democratic assessment methodology for my current research on the state of democracy in Oceania.

1 Commonwealth Principles

1.1 The Commonwealth Secretariat has initiated this roundtable on democracy in the Pacific as part of its commitment to enhancing democratic principles. For the past three decades the Commonwealth has sought to promote and defend democracy. The 1971 Declaration of Commonwealth principles, adopted at the Singapore Heads of Government meeting, affirmed the Commonwealth's belief "in the liberty of the individual under the law, in equal rights for all citizens regardless of gender, race, colour, creed or political belief, and in the individual's inalienable right to participate by means of free and fair and democratic political processes". The Heads of Government agreed to promote "representative institutions and guarantee personal freedom under the law that is our common heritage".
1.2 These principles were reaffirmed in the better known Harare declaration of 20 October, 1991. The Heads of Government 'rededicated' themselves to "democracy, democratic processes and institutions that reflect national circumstances, the rule of law, and the independence of the judiciary …". The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA), and other Commonwealth organisations were invited 'to play their full part in promoting these objectives'.

1.3 A 1995 New Zealand meeting produced the Millbrook Action Programme on the Harare Declaration. The Heads of Government pledged "to work for the protection of political values of association, namely democracy, democratic process and institutions that reflect national circumstances …". It was agreed that the Commonwealth Secretariat should work to enhance these values and provide assistance in constitutional and legal matters, including with selecting models, and initiating programmes of democratisation. The areas of election organisation and monitoring, the rule of law, and good government were identified, and collaboration with the C.P.A. was again sought "to strengthen democratic culture and effective parliamentary processes". The meeting further endorsed actions the Commonwealth Secretary General should take in the event of the Harare principles being violated.

2 Pacific Concerns

2.1 This Roundtable is taking place because of concerns that democracy has been and remains under threat in several parts of the Pacific. However it is worth noting that, when viewed in a comparative respective with other regions of developing countries, Oceania is doing rather well in the democracy stakes. The armed overthrow of democratically elected governments is rare – which helps explain the wide international media attention the Fiji and Solomon Island coups attracted. Governments in the Pacific are generally appointed and changed following elections. This has not been the case in other parts of the so-called third world. During the past 12 months there have been seven Pacific island elections (including in Fiji and the Solomons), followed by several orderly changes of government. Talk of the 'Africanisation' of the Pacific may turn out to be premature.

2.2 The focus of this paper is on how external factors influence the development of democracy in the nine Commonwealth Pacific island countries. These cover a wide range of cultures, geography and historical circumstances that makes generalisations difficult. There are three Polynesian states – Samoa, Tonga, Tuvalu; four Melanesian – Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji; and two Micronesian – Kiribati and Nauru. They range greatly in population from under 12,000 in the case of Nauru and Tuvalu to over 5 million in Papua New Guinea. Some are single islands (e.g. Nauru) – most are spread over a vast area of ocean which calls into question their characterization as 'small'. While all have the historic connection with the United Kingdom through the British Empire and Commonwealth, in more recent times, Polynesia's 'outside' contact has been mainly with New Zealand, and the Melanesia and Micronesian Commonwealth states with Australia. New Zealand has a particularly strong Polynesian link through its indigenous Maori people. Many Pacific peoples from Samoa, Tonga, Niue and Cook islands, have made New Zealand their home. New Zealand Polynesians (maori plus Pacific) now make up more than 20% of the population. This gives New Zealand a more direct and intimate relationship with Oceania than is the case with Australia. Like both Australian and New Zealand the island states of Oceania are increasingly looking north to Asia for their future economic prosperity.

2.3 There are a further five members of the Pacific Island Forum not directly covered as they are not members of the Commonwealth. This includes two micro-states which remain
in free association with New Zealand: the Cook Islands and Niue. There are also three U.S. freely associated states: the Marshal Islands, Federated States of Micronesia and Palau. The politics of these states reflect their American heritage, and provide useful reference points for comparison – for instance between Presidential and Parliamentary political systems.

This paper will first consider the difficulties of satisfactorily defining democracy. An analysis will then be made of aspects of colonialism – arguably the greatest external impact on Pacific political systems. Two remnants of colonialism are given particular attention: the establishment of 'artificial' national boundaries and – for Commonwealth countries – the Westminster political system. Recent emphasis by aid donors on 'good governance' requirements – regarded by some aid recipients as a new form of neo-colonialism - will also be considered.

3. What is meant by democracy?
3.1 One of the advantages of the IDEA approach to assessing democracy is that it broadens the concern from constitutional and institutional arrangements to focus on how democratic values and principles influence the way political systems operate in practice. It is about both the processes and outcomes of government. The two key concerns are accountability and equality – “popular control over public decision making and decision makers, and equality between citizens in the exercise of that control”. The approach stresses that democracy is not an all or nothing process but a matter of degree: the extent “to which people can exercise a controlling influence over public policy and policy-makers, enjoy equal treatment at their hands and have their voices heard equally”. The questions asked by IDEA about key democratic principles are: "how much? how far? to what extent?", rather than whether the country is democratic or not. These questions are considered under four headings: citizenship, law and rights; representative and accountable government; civil society and popular participation, and democracy beyond the state.

3.2 In Oceania much attention has been focused on the degree to which culture impacts on the form and style of the democracy. In this regard, the definition offered by Professor Ron Crocombe is worth noting. Democracy is a political system in which:

"1) The leaders are selected, by process appropriate to that context, by those whom they lead; and
2) That the leadership is responsive to the wishes of the people led. That responsiveness should include appropriate systems of accountability for effective performance.”

This definition has the advantage of enabling an assessment to be made of both the traditional and modern state. In recent times the emphasis has been on “good governance”, which will be considered in a later section of this paper. In many traditional systems the ideal of consensus decision making has been highlighted. Of course there were (and are) also more hierarchical and authoritarian chiefly systems – particularly in Polynesia. The Crocombe definition calls for an assessment on the degree to which chiefs could be held accountable for their actions. To this day there is a need to ensure that chiefly appeals to tradition and culture are not used to form a respectable veneer for authoritarian rule.

3 Colonialism
3.1 The most direct outside influence on Pacific island political systems is undoubtedly the period of colonial rule. Of the current members of the Pacific Island Forum, only Tonga was never formally a colony (although it was a protectorate of the United Kingdom). Tonga continues to be governed by its 1875 constitution. Power rests in the hands of the King and only 9 of the 30 members of the legislative assembly are elected. It clearly refutes the
suggestion that Pacific states would be 'more democratic' (at least in a Western sense) had they managed to escape colonial rule.

3.2 However, it must also be recognised that whatever can be said of colonialism, one conclusion is clear: it did not provide an effective training ground for western style democracy. Power rested not with the people – but with the colonial administration. As New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark's recent apology to the people of Samoa highlighted, colonial administrations did make mistakes and at times took actions that clearly went against the wishes and interests of the colonised people.

3.3 In the Pacific the decolonisation process is incomplete both in respect to the few remaining territories and attitudes. There is a general reluctance amongst the remaining dependencies (which include Tokelau, American Samoa, French Polynesia, New Caledonia) to complete the decolonisation process because of concerns regarding future economic support and the drop in standard of living that independence is likely to entail. For those that have independence, part of their determination to move beyond colonialism has been the re-assertion of cultural values and identity. This may include challenging the political system inherited from colonial rule.

4 Artificial Nations

4.1 Some sense of belonging to a state is an essential first step towards achieving democratic government. This is why the IDEA framework makes it one of their first democratic assessment questions. In the Pacific the issue highlights problems which help explain the political vulnerability of island states.

4.2 The most lasting legacy of the colonial era, and which has directly contributed to the region's political instability, has been the artificial nature of national boundaries. In some cases – most notably Fiji – this was further complicated by the importation of foreign labour.

4.3 Colonial borders were established to reflect the interests of the European powers, and paid scant regard to local culture or geography. Especially in Melanesia, the result has been ethnic conflict which has done much to undermine democratic government. The origins of the bitter decade of Papua New Guinea’s civil war in Bougainville in the 1990s, and the more recent internal strife in the Solomon Islands, can be traced to the drawing of boundaries which ignored local culture, and in which the indigenous people had no say.

4.4 Pacific island states have had to make do with their inherited boundaries. There are some rare exceptions. Britain agreed that the two island groupings making up the Gilbert and Ellice islands could part at independence and become the separate nations of Kiribati and Tuvalu – reflecting their Micronesian and Polynesian cultures respectively. In Micronesian both the Marshall Islands and Palau were able to separate from the Congress of Micronesia, and become independent countries.

4.5 The problem of “artificial nations” is more severe in Melanesia than in Polynesia. In the hierarchical chiefly systems of Polynesia authority extended over whatever territory could be secured through battle, and in this way more closely resembled Western nations. This contrasts sharply with the fragmented and local nature of political authority in Melanesia where, as a result, sentiments of nationhood have been much slower to develop.
4.6 Any attempt to redraw national boundaries would be likely to create more conflict than it would resolve. However, there is considerable scope to devolve authority within these borders, and in this way help meet local aspirations. This effectively has been the negotiated 'solution' to the Bougainville dispute and could, given time, help resolve strife in the Solomon Islands.

5 Inappropriate Political Systems

5.1 One of the problems of moving to more devolved political systems is that it clashes with the centralized nature of the Westminster political system. This raises the question of whether the Westminster system is itself part of the problem of political instability. I recall attending a regional seminar on security in the early 1990s where I was surprised to hear from a senior official that the independence constitutions would come to be regarded as a security threat. It proved to be a perceptive comment.

5.2 The notion of a “written” Westminster constitution is somewhat paradoxical. The 'pure' Westminster systems – such as in the United Kingdom and New Zealand – do not have formal written constitutions. The essence of the system is that parliament remains the highest court in the land, and is ultimately able to act unrestricted by a constitution. The scope for judicial review remains very limited.

5.3 All the former colonial territories in the Pacific administered by Britain, Australia and New Zealand were provided with formal written constitutions. The detailed nature of these constitutions – book length in the case of Papua New Guinea – seemed to reflect a naïve expectation that if the rules of government were written down they could be made to work. Tradition and culture were not ignored, but generally confined to the pre-amble. The hard questions of reconciling traditional and Westminster practices were generally left unresolved.

5.4 Samoa is a notable exception. Allowance was made for it to retain its matai system, which allowed only the matai heads of families to vote or stand for election to parliament. Universal suffrage was not introduced until it was endorsed by a 1990 referendum, and the restriction of parliamentary candidates to matai remains. It should be acknowledged that it can be argued that the Samoan system 'enhances', rather than restricts democracy. This is because matai are held accountable to the extended families they are responsible for, and which selects them for their leadership role. Nevertheless cases of matai loosing their authority for non-performance are rare.

5.5 A number of constitutions provide for matters of tradition, culture, land and language, to be the responsibility of Councils of Chiefs. The most visible of these is the Fijian Great Council of Chiefs. Other chiefly bodies, which in practice have little effective political authority, are the House of Ariki in the Cook Islands, National Council of Chiefs in Vanuatu and Council of Iroij in the Marshall Islands.

5.6 There have been calls for the 'burden' of the independence constitutions to be removed and a greater role to be given to traditional authority. There is competing evidence for the proposition that the more traditional the political system (or the less the outside influence) the more stable it is. This is a proposition which defenders of the status quo in Tonga like to argue. But that stability may be put under pressure following the reign of the present monarch. The experience of Samoa gives further credence to the proposition. However change, by its nature, can be destabilising. Greater democracy may mean more, not less, instability. There are implications here for outside states to consider.
6 What is Wrong with the Westminster System?

6.1 Given the very different cultural and historical settings in which the Westminster system evolved, it is not surprising that difficulties have been experienced in transplanting it to Pacific environments. Problems have arisen with the fundamental Westminster division between government and opposition Members of Parliament. This confrontational approach clashes with the Pacific ideal (seldom achieved in practice at the national level) of consensus decision making. The government/opposition split is considered to be divisive and wasteful of scarce financial and human resources. It seems strange to be paying politicians to challenge the government. Hence the yearning that emerges from time to time for governments of national unity. It makes sense in small societies to work together to promote the common good. But this has proved extraordinarily difficult to achieve in practice. Politics is by its nature a competitive vocation.

6.2 Deviations from the Westminster system to promote unity may create a whole new series of problems. The 1997 Fijian constitution sought to ensure power sharing between ethnically based political parties by requiring that any party gaining 10% or more seats in the House of Representatives is entitled to representation in the Cabinet. At the time of writing Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase was refusing to abide by the provision on the grounds that it was unworkable. The matter has been referred to the Supreme Court for resolution. Outside critics, including the governments of Australia and New Zealand, might reflect on how they would respond to a requirement to have key Opposition members in their Cabinet.

6.3 The problem goes beyond competing political agendas and personality clashes. The greater the emphasis on consensus, the less the vigilance of government that opposition MPs ideally should maintain. The Westminster system gives the parliamentary opposition the job of keeping the government honest. But procedures such as parliamentary question time and the committee system (and particularly public accounts committees) are only poorly established in most Pacific parliaments. As will be considered in the later section on 'good governance', the issue of integrity is the key to government's holding or regaining the trust of the people they represent. Government's cannot do this alone; they require an effective Opposition to make accountability work.

7 Political Parties and Electoral Systems

7.1 Political parties are widely regarded as essential ingredients of Westminster democracy through linking the rulers and the ruled. But parties have proved to be a particularly divisive factor in the Pacific context. Some of the smaller states – such as Niue and Tuvalu – have sought to run non-party systems. But to work the Westminster system requires strong stable parties – ideally just two in number - to form the Government and the Opposition. These should in theory be provided by the first-past-the-post (FPP) majoritarian electoral system. But the Pacific has proved to be the exception to one of the few 'golden rules' of my profession of political science: that FPP will produce a stable two party system. Proportional representation (PR) electoral systems, on the other hand can be relied upon to produce multi-party systems. But the Pacific experience has been for FPP to produce weak multi-party systems more characteristic of PR systems.

7.2 This has particularly been the case in Melanesia where a weak party system has become weaker. In recent elections the trend has been for an increasing number of parties (40 in the recent Papua New Guinea (PNG) election) and independent candidates (about half of those taking part in the PNG election). Party allegiance may be established after rather than
before the election. While Papua New Guinea can be considered an extreme case, it is the
direction in which the rest of Melanesia, and to a lesser extent the wider region, is heading.

7.3 Of course it can be argued that the 'problem' is an excess rather than a deficit of
democracy. Some will argue that it is better to elect independent representatives who are not
dictated to by a party. However, the issue is that without parties it is very difficult for voters
to know what, in policy terms, they are voting for. The vote tends to be made for candidates
not governments or particular policies. The problem becomes more difficult as the number of
candidates increases – further evidence of an 'excess' of democracy. As happened in the recent
election in Papua New Guinea, up to 60 candidates may contest one constituency – giving
victory to a candidate who has gained just 10% (or even less) of the deeply divided vote. In
these cases the elected member in effect represents only their clan.

7.4 These types of problems have given rise to calls for PNG to go back to the preferential
system it used prior to independence. But the controversial use by parties of the distribution
of preferences in the most recent Fiji elections demonstrates that there is no simple solution.
Practicing democracy is difficult. There is no perfect electoral system (as New Zealand is
finding out after moving from the First-Past-the-Post (FFP) to the proportional Mixed
Member Proportional (MMP) system).

7.5 Having too many parties and candidates is certainly preferable to having too few. The
long rule in Samoa of the Human Rights Protection Party (HRPP) has caused concern about
one-party rule, although elections have demonstrated no lack of Opposition candidates and
parties.

7.6 In most Pacific states elections produce around 50% turnover of MPs. This makes it
difficult to build up a body of experienced MPs from which a Westminster type Cabinet can
be formed. It is not surprising that problems arise when a high proportion of Ministers have
no previous parliamentary experience.

7.7 The weakness of the party system is particularly evident in the growing tendency of
MPs to change their party following an election. This is known as 'party-hopping' – or 'waka
(Maori canoe) jumping' in New Zealand. Not surprisingly, MPs want to join the 'winning'
side – and take up opportunities they could not achieve from the Opposition benches. A
number of countries (including New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and Fiji) have adopted laws
to prevent 'party hopping' – but with mixed results. Opponents of the legislation argued that
elected MPs should be free to follow their conscience.

7.8 The issue of 'party-hopping' is particularly relevant to the wider problem of
maintaining political stability. Under the Westminster system the Prime Minister remains in
office for as long as they can enjoy the confidence of a majority of MPs. Where disciplined
party systems operate this can generally be taken for granted. But this is not the case in weak
multi-party systems where a PM must constantly work to maintain the coalition which forms
their support base. They are at all times vulnerable to votes of no confidence, and Prime
Ministers and governments change outside of general elections.

8. Would a Presidential System be Better?
8.1 The key difference between the Westminster and Presidential systems is the separation
of powers between the three branches of government, the executive, legislature and judiciary.
The President is directly elected, rather than chosen from the legislature. Both the legislative
and executive branches are elected for fixed terms of office. The Courts ensure the actions of the other two branches are in accord with the constitution.

8.2 There are several possible advantages to be gained from the Presidential model. In parts of the region, particularly in Polynesia, it would be closer to traditional chiefly systems than parliamentary systems. The fixed term of office avoids (short of impeachment) the instability created by votes of no confidence. The need for the President to campaign nationwide to achieve election could ideally have a unifying effect. The requirement for the President to choose their cabinet from outside parliament opens up a greater range of experience and expertise.

8.3 It is interesting to observe that in Micronesia there are several kinds of political 'hybrids' which sought to combine the best features of both Westminster and Presidential systems. For instance, in Kiribati those aspiring to be President must first gain election to the legislature, and then that body's nomination for the Presidency. A nation wide poll follows. In the FSM the President is elected by Congress from amongst their numbers, but then must resign from the legislature in order to maintain the division of powers. Two further Micronesian states, the Marshall Islands and Nauru, use Presidential terminology, but follow Westminster practice, including the ability to move votes of no confidence.

8.4 The U.S. President heads a federal form of government, and this raises the question of whether federalism would deliver more effective government to Pacific countries. Only Palau and the Federated States of Micronesia are full federal systems. In Melanesia Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands are provincial systems, but ultimate power rests with the central government. A case can be made that the problems of 'artificial nations' referred to earlier may have been better met if more powers had been delegated to state level governments. A confederal rather than federal system may be the best approach, although this would increase the financial cost of government.

9. 'Good Governance': Whose Good?

9.1 The first part of this paper examined the lasting influence on Pacific Island politics of two legacies of the colonial era: national boundaries and the Westminster political system. Attention will now turn to what some regard as a second wave of colonialism – or neo-colonialism – what has become the creed of 'good-governance'. This supposedly universal template for effective government is part of the wider influence of globalisation – which is making the influence of boundaries and particular political systems less relevant.

9.2 'Good Governance' was defined by the 2000 Kiribati Forum Biketawa agreement as the practice of 'open, transparent, accountable, participatory, consultative, and decisive but fair and equitable' government. The same declaration referred to the “inalienable right” of all citizens to participate in the political process, and the need to uphold “democratic principles and institutions which reflect national and local circumstances, including the peaceful transfer of power, the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary….” The importance of “respecting and promoting indigenous rights and cultural values” was also recognised. These laudable principles are clearly uncontroversial – but they are more easily stated than interpreted or attained.

9.3 Problems arise between aid donors and recipients when the adoption of particular 'good governance' reforms considered important by the donor are made a condition of receiving aid. It is at this point that accusations of neo-colonialism arise and questions are
asked about “whose good” is being pursued. From the donors’ point of view, the lack of ‘good governance’ provided the answer to the ‘Pacific paradox’ – why large amounts of aid had not produced economic development. The answer was poor governance (which conveniently put the blame for non-achievement on the aid recipients). A direct link was made between the two ‘goods’ of democracy and economic development. While not disagreeing with the laudable goals of ‘good governance’, Pacific Island states cite other factors (such as small size, remoteness, limited products, transport costs) as the reasons for low economic growth.

9.4 There is a great irony in linking certain Western principles of democratic governance to the granting of aid. Donor nations that seek to ‘force’ democracy and honest and efficient government on recipients by imposing conditions on aid are clearly themselves guilty of an undemocratic act. In a true democracy governments will choose their own economic policy, and then be subject to the judgement of their own people – the voters – not by outside powers. It is not surprising that aid recipients protest at what appears to them to be unjustifiable interference in their domestic affairs. It seems to be the most recent attempt by outside powers to try and remake aid recipients in their own image. Aid donors are of course free to decide what they do with their own money. But there is, as IDEA’s assessment framework highlights, a need for aid donors to reflect on their own democratic actions ‘beyond the state’ – on the degree to which their external relations are conducted in accordance with democratic norms.

9.5 A brief analysis will now be made of the four key concerns of ‘good governance’ – legitimacy, accountability, respect and competence – to assess the extent to which they reflect both aid donor and recipient concerns. In Western style democracies the legitimacy of a government comes from periodic free and fair elections which provide their mandate to govern. But the degree to which Western-style elections confer legitimacy can be questioned. For instance, in recent US Presidential elections only around half the eligible voters cast a ballot – a much lower rate than in many Pacific island states. Furthermore, in the Pacific the introduction of outside systems can challenge rather than support the legitimacy of the state. For instance, many Tongans – and especially royalty and the nobles, consider the proposed democratic reforms to be ‘un-Tongan’.

9.6 The governance literature gives considerable attention to the notion of accountability – the holding of politicians and officials accountable for their actions and inactions. To achieve this there must be, in the buzzword of the governance literature, transparency. There is no disagreement by either aid donors or recipients that these are desirable goals. There is a direct link between accountability and the exposure of corruption. The media have a central role to play in ensuring accountability. This can be a difficult task in small, tightly knit societies, where the actions of the media can be branded divisive and culturally insensitive.

9.7 Nevertheless, as the earlier Crocombe definition of democracy highlighted, there is a need to recognise that accountability demands did not originate in modern day governance requirements and formal leadership codes. There is a strong Pacific tradition that chiefs who do not fulfil their obligations will be stripped of their right to hold leadership positions.

9.8 The governance literature stresses the need to respect and uphold human rights and the rule of law. From a Pacific perspective the emphasis on individual human rights clashes with more traditional concerns for collective – or village – rights. There is also an understandable concern about economic and social rights. But there is general agreement that the rule of law is important, not just for reasons of justice and humanity (including the removal of
discrimination against women and minority groups) but also because it is essential for economic development that commerce knows the rules in advance, and can be confident that they will be fairly administered and enforced.

9.9 The early governance focus was on economic reform, and improving the competence and effectiveness of the government. But this can directly clash with democratic values. Economic reforms required by the structural adjustment process may be highly unpopular. For instance, there has been a high political cost for small states where the government is the main employer, and 'structural adjustments' have required halving the size of the public service.

9.10 There is no doubt that a better standard of governance is clearly required in Oceania. But there is also a need for donor states to recognise that part of this need arises from the “disconnect” between traditional and Western forms of governance. To be effective there needs to be a Pacific solution to the governance issue.

10 Regional Response to Democratic Deficits
10.1 In the event of the overthrow or collapse of democracy what should be the response of countries of the Pacific region and concerned international organisations? Responses to this question vary widely from nothing at all, on the grounds of non-interference in internal affairs of another state, to armed intervention to restore the democratically elected governments. In the aftermath of the Fiji coups Australia, New Zealand, United Kingdom, the US and the Commonwealth were quick to condemn the overthrow of democratically elected government. But the shrillness of this condemnation contrasted sharply with the muted or lack of response from most Pacific island states. There was clearly much sympathy for the Fiji view that indigenous rights were more important than democratic rights and that outsiders should not interfere in domestic politics. There also seemed to be a double standard in the strong condemnation by outside powers of Fiji, while overlooking the democratic shortcomings of Tonga and Samoa.

10.2 Following the Fiji and Solomon coups Australia and New Zealand and a number of other states introduced sanctions against Fiji, which included the suspension of military assistance, and some aid. In 2000 the emphasis was on smart sanctions – directed at those considered responsible for the coups and seeking to avoid increasing the hardship of the ordinary people.

10.3 A myth has developed that in 1987 New Zealand planned to go further and contemplated military intervention to reverse the coup. I was working for Prime Minister David Lange at the time, and can verify that this was never the case. Military preparations were made – but these related to the protection of New Zealand citizens and diplomats, and ending the hijacking of the Air New Zealand aircraft.

10.4 Following the 2000 overthrow of democracy in Fiji and the Solomon Islands New Zealand and Australia’s demand for a strong regional response were only partially met by the Biketawa declaration adopted by the Kiribati Forum meeting. This requires the Secretary General of the Forum to initiate appropriate action if a regional security crisis has occurred, or seems likely to occur. The weak nature of the statement reflected the strong division of views between Australia and New Zealand on the one hand and the rest of the Forum on the other.
11 The South Pacific Looks North

11.1 There are limits beyond which external pressure – including that from the Commonwealth – which is designed to reinforce democracy and good governance may prove to be counter productive. The foreign policy dynamics of the region are changing, and the influence of the traditional (and Commonwealth) 'powers' of Australia and New Zealand are declining. All the Commonwealth Pacific Island states are now members of the European Union aid grouping, the ACP. Pacific islands are increasingly looking north to Asia and gaining a receptive response. For instance, Japan is the major regional donor and hosts regular meetings of Heads of Government.

11.2 There are other countries along the outer rim of the Oceania region which do not share the Commonwealth’s commitment to the Western values of liberal democracy. China is becoming increasingly active in the region and offered sympathetic assistance to Fiji following the coups. Its rival, Taiwan, has bankrolled the Solomon Islands following the collapse of its economy brought on by ethnic conflict. Island states have praised China’s attitude of “non – interference” in the affairs of its aid recipients. The “lack of strings” attached to Chinese aid has been contrasted with alleged “bullying” by Australia and New Zealand. Fiji Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase returned from a recent official visit to China praising his hosts for not criticising or imposing sanctions on Fiji after the coups (as did Britain, Australia, New Zealand the European Union and the US). Indonesia can also be expected to play a greater role in Pacific affairs. It has recently taken the initiative of proposing a South West Pacific Ministers meeting involving Indonesia, Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Philippines and East Timor.

12 Enhancing Pacific Democracy

12.1 What measures can be taken or avoided by outside powers to enhance democracy? First, there are two actions it is important to avoid. Trends to date suggest that it is not in the interests of democracy or regional stability to provide military assistance. The island states do not face external threats. In the few states that possess armed forces there has been a disturbing tendency for the military to become involved in politics.

12.2 It is also wise to avoid 'megaphone' diplomacy. Lectures on the virtues of democracy and public rebukes delivered by outside powers are likely to be resented and counter productive. While statements on what - for instance – Australia and New Zealand consider to be human and democratic rights issues, are of course appropriate, a demand that Pacific Island states share these beliefs is not. Lecturing is seen as hectoring.

12.3 What might be helpful would be a public recognition from outside Commonwealth powers that transplanting a 'foreign' system of government into countries of vastly different cultures and circumstances was bound to run into difficulties. Not all the 'blame' for democratic shortcomings rest with the island states. As this paper has acknowledged, they did not determine their borders, or constitutional systems. Furthermore, as IDEA likes to stress, democracy is an ideal which is only more or less achieved. The 'old' Commonwealth are far from perfect, for instance in regard to their treatment of indigenous peoples (as has been pointed out by some Pacific states).

12.4 Democratic and good governance values cannot be imposed. Signing lofty declarations is much less important than the practical implementation of democratic ideals. To be effective democratic principles must be believed and come from within rather than be
imposed from without. The only form of democracy that will flourish in Fiji, the Solomon Islands and other Pacific islands will be home grown.

12.5 A means of actively involving Pacific island states in considering democratic practices appropriate to their cultures and circumstances is provided by the International IDEA democratic assessment process. IDEA stress the importance of the country being analysed 'owning' what is in effect a democratic audit. I am currently conducting preliminary research for a democratic assessment of Pacific Island states. It is envisaged that this will follow the IDEA practice of workshops of local politicians, NGOs journalists and academics. The framework has the advantage of identifying key democratic principles but leaving open the means, including constitutional and institutional structures, for achieving them. This would mean that when, for instance, the argument is made – as it has by Fiji PM Qarase – that Western Liberal democracy cannot work in Fiji, the response would be to ask: what kind of democracy would work?

12.6 There are other very practical and more substantive steps which could be taken to directly involve the participation of Pacific island states in considering the state of regional democracy. Elected legislatures are the core feature of representative democracy, but too often in the Pacific have been ineffective. The establishment of a Pacific Island Parliamentary Association (PIPA) would help strengthen legislative bodies. The Heads of Government have their own annual meetings, as do the Finance and other Ministers. A regular meeting of regional parliamentarians would provide a forum for discussing the strengthening of their democratic institutions.

12.7 Many of the island Parliaments are members of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) and take part in its regional activities. Costs associated with the new parliamentary grouping would be minimised if meetings were held in conjunction with CPA activities. While CPA members (including Australia and New Zealand) would form the core of a new regional parliamentary association, there would be advantages in including the former US Trust Territories of the Federated States of Micronesia, Marshall Islands and Palau. This would provide an opportunity to exchange views on the relative merits of parliamentary, presidential and federal systems, as well as encouraging the search for more secure home grown forms of democratic governance.